

ART. XXII.—*Notes on the Wombat, Phascolomys ursinus, Shaw, from Flinders Island.*

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(With Plate LXI.).

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During the latter part of the 18th century, Wombats were known to exist plentifully on many of the islands in Bass Strait.

The earliest recorded example of the genus was that captured on Clarke Island in 1797, during an expedition sent from Sydney, New South Wales, to rescue the crew of the *Sydney Cove*, wrecked between Preservation and Rum Islands, off the south-west coast of Flinders Island. This was brought back to New South Wales, where it lived in captivity for six weeks, its body being sent to England during the same year by Hunter, then Governor of New South Wales.

Although there is every reason to believe that the mainland species (*Phascolomys mitchelli*, Owen) was well known to the early settlers prior to the discovery of the island species, it is strange that no specimens appear to have been sent from New South Wales, at any rate, until many years later.

Flinders was evidently acquainted with the New South Wales species prior to the discovery of the island form, for, in referring to that found on Clarke Island, he says¹ "The little bear-like quadruped is known in New South Wales, and called by the natives Womat, Wombat, or Wombach."

In addition to Clarke Island, this animal occurred plentifully on Cape Barren and the Furneaux Islands on the eastern side, and King Island on the western side of the Strait, and was

¹ Flinders. *Voyage to Terra Australis*, 1814, vol. i., Introduction, p. cxxxv.

repeatedly mentioned in the accounts of the early expeditions by Bass, Flinders, Péron, and others. Flinders¹ also states that "Preservation and the Passage Isles do not possess it."

Unfortunately these animals have been exterminated from all the islands they were known to inhabit, with the sole exception, so far as I have been able to ascertain, of Flinders, the largest of the group on the eastern side of the Strait.

The material obtained by the National Museum, which has recently been dealt with by Professor Spencer and myself in two separate papers,² and in which a full account of the literature on the subject is given, proves that these animals also existed on Deal Island in the Kent Group, and Kangaroo Island on the west of Flinders. It is also very probable that they occurred about the same time on several of the adjacent islands, both on the east and west sides of the Strait.

During two separate visits to the Bass Strait islands, undertaken at the suggestion of Professor Spencer, Director of the Museum, with the object of finding if the Wombat still existed there, I was fortunate in discovering it still living on Flinders Island, and brought back two skins and an incomplete skeleton.³ Unfortunately, owing to the limited time available and the rough nature of the country inhabited by them, I was not successful in obtaining a living specimen, and could only make arrangements to have the first one captured sent to Melbourne. Their burrows are usually constructed under the huge granite boulders and extend for some distance. Exhaustive enquiries among the half-castes and settlers on the islands, and the fishermen visiting there, failed to reveal any evidence of its existence at the present time on any of the adjacent islands.

However, through the courtesy of Dr. J. W. Barrett, with whom I visited the islands, and who kindly interested himself in the matter, a living specimen captured on the northern end of Flinders was received by the Museum on the 28th of October last. This proved to be a female, and, as I found later, was carrying a fairly-developed young one in the pouch.

1 Ibid.

2 Memoirs of the Nat. Museum, No. 3, Feb., 1910.

3 See " " " " " p. 47.

Although inclined to be savage for the first few days, she soon became accustomed to my presence and took the food offered, consisting of fresh grass and thistles, very readily. By gentle treatment she gradually permitted me to handle her, and seemed particularly fond of being rubbed along the back, head and sides. I found that by rubbing her along the sides, behind the foreleg, she almost invariably tumbled over lazily on her side; in fact she seemed unable to resist the inclination to do so. By continuing the rubbing process between the forelegs and under the jaws, she would gradually settle herself more comfortably, and allow both fore and hind feet to be gently handled.

It was during such an operation that I discovered the presence of the young one in the pouch, and noticed it was attached to the teat and had the eyes closed. Any sudden movement or slight noise would cause her to immediately start up and huddle herself in a corner of her enclosure, uttering a low growl and kicking violently backwards with both hind legs at once.

On the 10th November, or 14 days after her arrival, it was noticed that the young one, though still in the pouch, was not attached to the nipple and had its eyes open. It would occasionally extend one or both fore feet from the pouch as though stretching itself. The following day it was found crawling about in an apparently very weak state, close by the mother. The latter appeared to be very uneasy, and attempted to push it under her body with her paws. Every care was taken to prevent her being disturbed, but when visited later in the day the young one was lying near her, cold and almost dead. No sooner had I picked it up than the old one rushed at me savagely and, failing to reach me, bit pieces from the edge of the box on which I stood.

I eventually succeeded in soothing her, and after a time she permitted me to expand the pouch, which seemed to have contracted very much, sufficiently to insert the young one. My efforts were, however, useless, for, apparently owing to her quick movements, the young one was again ejected, and was found quite dead the same evening.

A second living specimen, captured near Killiecrankie, on the north-west side of Flinders Island, was received on 20th January last. This was also a female and not full-grown. It arrived in

very poor condition, and although taking its food readily, it did not thrive, and unfortunately died on 15th February. It was a particularly tame and gentle creature and could be handled with impunity.

In habits these animals remind one of the Rodents, their manner of feeding and quick side-to-side movement of the jaws being very similar. They are very quick in their movements when excited or alarmed, and run with greater speed than one would expect from such an apparently awkward animal. When touched, especially near the hind quarters, they have a peculiar habit of kicking violently backward with both hind feet. This, it was noticed, occurred even when approached by its companion. If annoyed, they do not hesitate to use both teeth and claws.

A peculiarity not before noticed is their habit of using the fore feet for grasping, closing the claws on to the roughened under-surface of the paw to such an extent that small objects such as grass leaves can easily be seized. When feeding they repeatedly grasp and wrench off with one of the paws pieces of grass stems protruding from the mouth, or separate the clumps of long grass in order to obtain some specially-desired portion. They are particularly partial to the fresh green seed stems, and invariably select these first.

In confinement these specimens drank very little water, even in the hottest weather, and only once was one of them actually seen in the act. They spent most of the day sleeping, partly buried in their bedding, but would take feed at any time.

The first specimen received is evidently full-grown and in excellent condition. Compared with the Tasmanian species (*Phascolomys tasmaniensis*)¹ it appears somewhat smaller. The hair is fairly soft to the touch, not coarse as in *P. mitchelli*, nor so silky as *P. latifrons*. Colour grizzled-grey, slightly darker on the hind quarters, lighter on head and neck. Underside of jaws, neck and body, inner side of limbs, and interior of ears, dirty white. Underfur fairly abundant, particularly on the neck, shoulders and sides, varying in colour from brown on the back to dark greyish on the sides. Eyes dark reddish-brown.

1 Memoirs of Nat. Museum, No. 3, Feb., 1910, p. 57.

Two teats situated just within the opening of the pouch.

The second specimen is immature. Colour, dark grizzled-grey, lighter on front of head, limbs, and underside. The hairs of the back and sides, when closely examined, are dark brown, almost black at their extreme tips, and conspicuously ringed with white towards their distal end. Shoulders and along centre of back blackish, due to the abundant long, projecting, coarser hairs. Underfur fairly thick, dark brown. Sides of muzzle and feet dark brown. Ears well haired, with a dark-brown patch behind, inner sides whitish.

Dimensions :—

Head and body	-	-	-	-	650 mm.
Hind foot	-	-	-	-	73 mm.
Ear	-	-	-	-	60 mm.
Tail from anus	-	-	-	-	50 mm.
Protruding portion of tail	-	-	-	-	24 mm.

Dimensions of young female :—

Head and body	-	-	-	-	255 mm.
Hind foot	-	-	-	-	24 mm.
Ear	-	-	-	-	12 mm.
Tail	-	-	-	-	10 mm.

From evidence obtained at the time of, and since, my visit to the islands, this species appears to vary in colour to the same extent as the Tasmanian and Australian species, black or nearly black varieties being occasionally met with.